

Sense of touch may be more important than was thought in its effect on how people act

RANDOLPH E. SCHMID, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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WASHINGTON - Scientists are finding that how something feels to a person can affect how he or she acts.

In one experiment, for example, 86 people took part in negotiations over a new car with a sticker price of \$16,500.

Some were seated on hard wooden chairs. Others had comfy padded seats.

After their first offers were rejected, the participants made a second proposal for the car.

Note to car dealers:

— People on stiff wooden chairs took a hard line in the deal, raising their offered price by \$896.50.

— But the relaxed folks in soft chairs were willing to spend an extra \$1,243.60.

The hardness, the researchers concluded, produced strictness and rigidity in the negotiation.

"We're not just a brain in a jar, our body is fundamentally tied to our understanding of the world," said Joshua M. Ackerman of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a co-author of the study.

Ackerman said he was studying how people use their senses and it seemed like research on touch was underdeveloped.

The chair experiment was one of a series of tests he and colleagues did showing that the sense of touch can have a significant impact on people's reactions, even though they may not realize it.

Understanding the effect of touch "may be especially important for negotiators, pollsters, job seekers, sensory marketers, and others," concluded Ackerman, John A. Bargh of Yale and Christopher C. Nocera of Harvard in a paper being published Friday in the journal *Science*.

Language contains images such as "weighty matters" or "gravity of the situation" in which concepts of heaviness and lightness convey differences in seriousness or importance.

So the researchers decided also to test that idea.

To do that, they asked 54 passers-by to evaluate a job candidate by reading that person's resume, which was attached to a clipboard.

Some of the clipboards weighed three-fourths of a pound (a third of a kilogram), while others weighed 4.5 pounds (about 2 kilograms).

Note to job seekers:

People holding the heavy clipboard evaluated the job candidate as overall better and more serious than did people holding the same resume on a light clipboard.

The effects were specific, Ackerman explained. Holding a light clipboard or sitting in a hard chair didn't necessarily put people in a bad mood, but it did produce specific changes in their behaviour.

Ackerman said the researchers expected to see a difference in the clipboard experiment, but were surprised it worked as readily as it did.

"Having this simple cue of weight really changed people's opinions," he said in a telephone interview.

And as for the hard-versus-soft chair, he said they knew touching things with the hands was expected to have an effect, but they weren't sure if touching with other parts of the body would also.

The research was funded by the Sloan School of Management at MIT and the National Institute of Mental Health.